

# Real, Close Friends: The Effects of Perceived Relationships with YouTube Microcelebrities on Compliance

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Popular culture — a factor contributing to the evolution of contemporary societies — is a subset of culture where people use performances, expressions, and other ventures to create community and spread cultural information (Danesi 2). This definition of popular culture also posits that “expressive structures” serve to “enhance solidarity, understanding, and transmission of knowledge” (Danesi 3). The website YouTube, the focus of this study, serves as a popular culture hub and within it exist various types of communities that share information with each other through individualistic expression.

YouTube is one of the largest online platforms available today created for video uploading. Since its inception in 2005, YouTube has risen to be incredibly popular; as of 2018, the site hosts 1.8 billion users per day, making it the most popular platform that Google has to offer (Gilbert). YouTube has spawned not only copious numbers of avid viewers but also “microcelebrities” or “YouTube stars,” who entertain these viewers by posting original content to their channels. Popular YouTube stars who have arrived at almost-celebrity status have managed to build connections with their viewers; some of the most successful creators have millions of subscribers. For individuals who are not considered to be mainstream celebrities, their ability to affect such large numbers of people is impressive.

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*The Popular Culture Studies Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 1  
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Of special interest to us was the gaming community on YouTube (i.e. the video gamers' community). While video games themselves were popular at the start of YouTube, posting gaming videos on the site did not exist until YouTuber Blame Truth uploaded a video featuring his gameplay of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* with his voice providing commentary on the game (Savino). This video was revolutionary in that it sparked many others to post similar gaming videos with their own personal touches. For example, YouTuber Hutch discussed topics such as God and his use of cigarettes in his videos of gameplay (Savino), adding a more personal touch to his videos and allowing his viewers to feel more connected to the man behind the screen. These videos and gaming personalities gave rise to the gaming communities that exist on YouTube today.

It is difficult to understand how these seemingly ordinary people cultivate such large followings simply by posting videos on the Internet. But according to Stuart Dredge, their ordinariness is what makes them appealing to followers. While this sense of "normalcy" can be found in other types of entertainers, it is much more prevalent on YouTube. Trying to achieve a better understanding of how these ordinary people gain a following willing to listen to them and fulfill their requests is the subject that gave rise to this study. Broadly, the topics explored here contribute to answering the questions: what can YouTubers do to gain followers, and how can they influence their followers to perform behaviors they request? Three frequently discussed factors in existing media and popular culture studies literature that can help answer these general questions are: perceptions users have of the YouTubers' authenticity; closeness people feel to the YouTuber; parasocial relationships (i.e., one-sided relationships) followers' form with content creators on YouTube. More specifically, we were curious about whether perceptions of authenticity and closeness would contribute to the formation of a friendship — albeit a false friendship — with YouTube stars, and if this feeling of a friendship could influence the behaviors of fans. We argue here that not only do these false friendships create a psychological sense of community, but also influence followers beyond online interactions.

Authenticity is a media consumer's perception that the media figure they are viewing is being "real"; it is the perception that the media figures are free of influence from others and are portraying themselves the way they really are outside of a mediated reality. It logically follows that if fans of a media persona perceive that the persona is of a genuine nature, there is a greater likelihood that it could be perceived as a friend when compared to a persona that is perceived as inauthentic.

In line with this assumption, the closer or more connected a fan feels to a media persona, the higher the likelihood of developing a feeling of friendship. Finally, it is also likely that this perception of a friendship may lead fans to comply with media figures' requests of their fans such as making a charitable donation or attending a media event.

This study discusses these factors in combination to see their effect on YouTube users' intentions to perform behaviors requested by YouTube stars. Using Markiplier, a microcelebrity on YouTube in the online videogaming videos community as a starting point, this study examines perceived authenticity and perceived closeness as potential factors that gain followers and promote parasocial relationships. This study also observes if these variables, including parasocial relationships, predict peoples' intentions to make charitable donations and attend live events where the YouTuber will make an appearance. Due to the fact YouTube is a giant in the world of mediated communication and popular culture, this study seeks to increase our understanding of the attraction of the platform and the creators on it, and the influence that these creators have on the massive communities they have built.

## The Popularity of YouTube

Being that YouTube holds such a prominent place in the spotlight of popular culture, it is important to understand how and why the video-hosting site has become so prevalent in contemporary society. Scholars seeking to understand the craze behind a site like YouTube have pointed to its nature, which is that of participatory culture. One such researcher, Clement Chau, outlines participatory culture on YouTube as being made up of five parts. First, YouTube has low barriers on expression and engagement meaning that it is easy for users to join and interact with others to allow people to grow their online communities (67). Second, YouTube allows for and supports the creation and sharing of original content by its users (69). Third, informal, unregulated mentorship takes place on YouTube allowing users to learn from each other by passing on information (71). Fourth, YouTube operates based on contributions (e.g. video sharing, commenting), and these contributions build community between other users and the creators of the content as well (71). Finally, YouTube facilitates social connections and interactions between people who share similar interests, encouraging connections and collaborations (72). Overall, participatory culture on sites such as YouTube

allow for easy access to engagement, learning, collaboration, and artistic expression that spans an array of popular culture areas (e.g. video games, film, music) making the site incredibly popular.

## YouTube as a Community

Although hundreds of definitions of community have been put forth by various scholars, it has been pointed out that when the average person thinks of the term “community” they think of a place where people know each other and provide different kinds of support to one another (Bess et al. 3). We use this definition throughout this work as it is fitting for a place like YouTube. In the cases of YouTube gaming communities, many members provide each other with instrumental support through gaming instructions but may also provide each other with emotional support through encouragement and friendships.

David D. McMillian and David M. Chavis propose a model outlining what gives a person a sense of community which is made up of the following components: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. YouTubers who post gaming videos are perhaps then able to create a sense of community with their followers as they fulfill each component of this model. For membership, followers follow the pages and updates of YouTubers and comment or interact with other “members” of that community. Further, there are many people who do not feel that they have a sense of community within their own geographical or place-based communities; therefore, they use membership in online or virtual communities as a substitute (Roberts, Smith, and Pollock 223). For influence, it is known that YouTube stars can make requests of their followers and the followers comply. Why they comply will be our focus later on in this study. For fulfillment of needs, many needs of users are met by becoming members of these gaming communities. Needs that have been cited as being fulfilled by joining these communities and watching gaming videos are being immersed in a game while having friendly company (Petrova and Gross 2), being entertained (4), learning information and tactics to complete games (4), fulfilling information-seeking needs (Sjöblom and Hamari 991), having a substitution for an in-person friend to play games with (Muncy), reliving memories and feeling nostalgia without needing to play a game oneself (Muncy), and tension release (Sjöblom and Hamari 990). Finally, for shared emotional connection, members contact each other through the platform and bond over familiar and similar interests

and events. Overall, YouTube is perfectly equipped to provide its users with a psychological sense of community.

### YouTube's Popular Culture and Gaming Communities

YouTube hosts millions of instances of popular culture today and is the perfect venue to do so because this sub-culture is born of new trends favored by massive numbers of people and is ever-changing (Danesi 3). Anyone with video uploading capabilities can contribute to YouTube, making it a hub of varying cultural items. Professor and author of popular culture books, Marcel Danesi, indicates that a highlight of pop culture in 2017 was the increasing popularity of microcelebrities who often came from YouTube, and who contributed to a “global digital village” (Danesi 11), allowing for endless engagement between stars and users.

Gaming is an activity that is easy to form community over and subsequently easy to become engaged in because of the nature of video games; this media type requires that users be active rather than passive such as they are while consuming other forms of media (e.g. television). Games such as massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) are also home to communities that provide players with social and emotional support (O'Connor et al. 459). It has been argued that games themselves — especially ones that involve role-playing — are so built to foster friendships and community or subculture (Fine 1). Video games often involve picking characters or avatars and interacting with other players in role playing scenarios where these subcultures can be found.

As far as popular YouTube gamers go, they are likely able to create a sense of community in part through parasocial interactions with their followers. A parasocial interaction occurs when a media figure appears to be attempting to interact with a viewer even when they are not directly speaking to that viewer (Horton and Wohl 215). This effect is usually accomplished when the media persona looks directly into the camera to speak, making it seem as if eye contact is occurring, a practice that is very common in gaming videos. These instances of what appear to be communication with the follower make the YouTube star seem close to a viewer and form the basis of what feels like a friendship. In addition to these interactions, YouTube microcelebrity popularity has also been attributed to their humble beginnings; many YouTubers, especially gamers and vloggers, started out using basic webcams (Dredge). This humbleness fosters a sense of intimacy, further encouraging feelings of friendship and community.

As a summary, YouTube is an online platform made up of videos from all areas of popular culture, including video games, and is well-equipped to provide a place where people can form a virtual sense of community. YouTube stars draw massive numbers of people to their pages and postings by fostering a sense of friendship. Being a part of a community means that influence from community leaders (i.e. YouTube stars) can occur, but what specifically drives that influence is a question worth exploring.

### Factors Affecting the Popularity of YouTube Stars

Liz Lavaveshskul outlines four factors that potentially contribute to the rise of popular YouTubers. First, content creators with many followers make videos about aspects of popular culture that they are deeply interested in, and they showcase their interest on their channels. Second, they have their particular personalities that they demonstrate through their videos; and they maintain that their personality is “real” rather than “fake” in order to gain an audience. Third, YouTube stars need to interact with their audience in some way through commenting, involving them in new content creation, and so on, in order to engage the audience in their channel. One final, relevant point made is that YouTubers must use the community-building nature of the site to their advantage by staying connected to and giving back to their followers (Lavaveshskul 383-4). In sum, the creators of content on YouTube rise to Internet stardom when they invest themselves deeply in their popular culture topic, let their genuine personality come through in their videos and postings, interact with their audience to foster perceptions of closeness, and attempt to maintain a sense of community on their channel(s).

While several creator-based factors can influence the popularity of a YouTuber, most of their popularity is reliant on the viewers that watch their videos and those viewers’ perceptions of the content creator. That is to say that YouTube stars can perform behaviors such as talking with their followers to increase audience perceptions, but the audience perceptions and behaviors are what gain and maintain followers in the end. Perceived authenticity of and perceived closeness to the creator are two important audience-based factors contributing to YouTube star popularity.

Perceived authenticity and larger, more loyal followings are a pattern demonstrated in the literature on YouTube. For example, Florencia Garcia-Rapp’s ethnographic study of the YouTuber Bubz’s channel concluded that,

“demonstrating expertise and effort, and then consistently following the community rules of self-presentation and engagement with brands and viewers without ‘losing your own self’ is at the heart of the values of YouTube’s beauty community” (120). Throughout this study of Bubz’s videos, comments, and blog posts, Garcia-Rapp noticed the recurring idea of authenticity: the sense of being “real.” The study further revealed that when viewers perceive that a creator is trustworthy, honest, open, and rightfully motivated, they are more likely to consider the creator as “real” (131). For example, in the case of Bubz, her viewers perceive her as trustworthy and authentic because she only promotes products she has used and liked, as opposed to pushing products due to paid promotion. This study demonstrates that when viewers perceive authenticity, it has a positive impact on growing viewership.

Perceived closeness, as defined here, is a viewer’s sense of shared experiences with, somehow being related to, or being known by a media figure. Feeling close to a YouTube star in some way can promote followership. For example, a qualitative study examining race, ethnicity, and identity of four beauty guru YouTubers and their audiences by Samara Anarbaeva showed that these stars connect with followers by forming connections with those who share experiences of race and ethnicity (12). Sharing experiences with a YouTuber means a follower can feel more “known,” as if the star is close to the follower because they share something(s) in common. Studies such as these show feelings of closeness mean that viewers are more likely to return to those particular YouTubers over and over again.

Perceived authenticity and perceived closeness are not only related to the success of YouTubers but are also factors that are intricately related to each other. An example of their relationship can be seen in the case of the YouTuber Zoella, as pointed out by Anne Jerslev. She explains that the microcelebrity status of content creators like Zoella is based on feelings of intimacy and easy accessibility, both of which are related to authenticity. Jerslev states, “Zoella’s vlogs are centered around performances of authenticity, trustworthiness, access, and a temporality of presence and continuity” (5241). This authentic behavior contributed to the perceived closeness of viewers to Zoella, as she did authentic “confessional” videos and directly communicated with her viewers. However, after her YouTube success, Zoella went on to produce a book about her life that was ghostwritten, with no indication of this in press material or the book cover (5245). Followers reported losing trust in Zoella, and ultimately the close connection they had with her, leading to unfollowing her channel. Overall, this breach of authenticity led to a decrease in

perceptions of closeness and a decrease in followers and success. When it comes to YouTube, protecting that sense of intimacy and closeness is imperative to maintaining a large, supportive following.

### Parasocial Relationships and Perceptions of Authenticity and Closeness

Parasocial relationships are defined as perceived relationships that arise when individuals are repeatedly exposed to a media persona, and the individual develops a sense of intimacy, perceived friendship, and identification with the celebrity (Chung and Cho 482). This one-sided relationship involves the media persona not feeling the same way about the follower and may not even know of the existence of the follower. Although the follower is aware of this, they still feel as if they are friends with the persona. Two factors that can increase parasocial relationships between viewers and YouTubers are the aforementioned perceptions of authenticity and closeness that lead YouTubers to gain followers in the first place.

Perceived authenticity and closeness, and parasocial relationships have been studied together before demonstrating an important connection between these audience-perception variables and these relationships. For instance, Elizabeth L. Cohen and William J. Tyler looked at how ghost-tweeting affected perceived authenticity and closeness of online personalities, and how this affects parasocial relationships. According to their work, media figures that are perceived as authentic are viewed as such because they “express realistic and genuine emotions” (Cohen and Tyler 343). Therefore, results demonstrated that ghost-tweeting can have a negative effect on perceived authenticity and closeness. This article exemplifies the fact how authenticity is built by genuineness, or in this case, doing one’s own work. When a YouTuber or media figure is not the primary content creator, it creates a sense of separation between the follower and the media figure because they do not seem real or socially accessible. Cohen and Tyler go on to say that the absence of ghost-tweeting reduced the perception of distance, which increased the feelings of the existence of a parasocial relationship (345). In sum, appearing authentic closes the perceived distance between followers and stars, thereby increasing perceptions of a parasocial relationship.

The current study seeks to demonstrate that feelings of authenticity and closeness can foster parasocial relationships between followers of YouTube stars and the stars. Therefore, the following questions are put forth: Does the perception of authenticity of a YouTube star influence the parasocial relationships that viewers



have with that star? Does the perception of closeness of a YouTube star influence the parasocial relationships the viewers have with that star?

Futhermore, evidence exists that parasocial relationships with media figures drive behavioral intent. For instance, Siyoung Chung and Hichang Cho found that when parasocial relationships were present between individuals and celebrities, the positive reception of brand endorsements and brand credibility increased (489). This led to greater purchasing intention for those brands. From the results, it was determined that parasocial relationships with celebrities can occur through social media exchanges through repeated interactions and self-disclosure, and that this can have an impact on purchase intentions of consumers. In another study on parasocial relationships and behavioral intentions, researchers Jessie M. Quintero Johnson and Paula D. Patnoe-Woodley showed that radio listeners felt they had multiple instances of parasocial interactions (i.e. when one perceives a media persona is addressing them directly when they are not) and strong parasocial relationships with their favorite radio personalities. These strong parasocial relationships led to a greater percentage of recall of the brands and products the radio personalities promoted, as well as an increase in the intention to purchase those products (Quintero Johnson and Patnoe-Woodley 44).

In both studies, a parasocial relationship occurred when the individual was exposed to the media personality repeatedly over time. This repeated exposure eventually led to a connection being formed, which led to an influence on the behavioral intentions of the individual. The same may be applicable to YouTubers. For fans of a specific YouTuber, they can opt to be exposed to that person continuously over time. To maintain consistency on their channel, YouTubers sometimes upload new videos weekly or even daily. This repeated exposure to the YouTuber, combined with the perceptions of authenticity and closeness, may lead to a parasocial relationship being formed between the YouTuber and the viewer.

If these parasocial relationships are indeed present, there may be reason to believe that these special relationships influence YouTube viewers' behavioral intentions. Some YouTube stars request that their followers make charitable donations through their pages and others ask that their followers attend conventions or lives shows where they plan to make an appearance. It is proposed here that authenticity and closeness perceptions lead to the development of parasocial relationships with these stars, which in turn lead followers to want to support these stars by complying with their requests. Therefore, the following questions are put forth: Do the parasocial relationships that viewers have with a YouTube star

influence their behavioral intentions to make charitable donations? Do the parasocial relationships that viewers have with a YouTube star influence their behavioral intentions to attend conventions or live shows?

## Methodology

*The Followers of YouTube Star Markiplier.* For this study, the YouTube star Mark Fischbach, known by his followers as “Markiplier,” was examined to answer the research questions. Markiplier’s claim to fame is that he has played videogames all his life and often posts videos about videogame play, among other topics. He rose to fame through his comedic commentary and flamboyant personality, gaining traction in the gaming community with his play-throughs of horror games. He openly discusses and expresses his love for videogames in his YouTube videos, and his viewers are very receptive to this. He has over 23 million subscribers.

Markiplier’s followers were chosen as Fischbach exemplifies many of the aforementioned creator-based factors that make a YouTuber popular. For example, using Lavaveshkul’s points, Fischbach lets his outgoing and loud personality shine on his channel, posts videos for his followers often, and demonstrates care for maintaining his community. Additionally, Markiplier asks his followers to attend live events as well as make charitable donations, which made him a suitable candidate for studying his followers’ behavioral intentions.

*Procedure.* Through an online survey instrument hosted by Qualtrics, questionnaire data was collected in the spring of 2019 from respondents who were at least 18 years of age and who self-admitted to regularly watching videos from Markiplier on YouTube. Respondents were recruited through advertisements on Reddit (specifically, on Markiplier’s subreddit) and on Facebook. The following questions, in a randomized order, asked respondents about their perceptions of Markiplier’s authenticity and how close they felt to him. Respondents were then asked about various feelings and behaviors they may have exhibited that would suggest a parasocial relationship between Markiplier and themselves. After this, respondents answered the questions about their behavioral intentions regarding charity donations and attendance at events. Finally, respondents answered the demographic questions.

*Participants.* Of the 118 respondents 26 were deemed ineligible due to missing data. The final sample size was 92. For all demographic items, 3.3% (3) of the sample did not report any information. Of these 92 respondents, 56.5% were female

(52), 34.8% were male (32), and 4.3% reported they were a gender other than male or female (4). This sample was 76.1% White/Caucasian (70), 8.7% Asian (8), 5.4% mixed race (5), 3.3% Hispanic/Latino (3), and 3.3% African American (3). The age range for this sample was between 18 and 41 years old. ( $M = 23.76$ ,  $SD = 5.38$ ). According to responses to other demographic questions, 92.4% (85) of respondents were subscribed to Markiplier on YouTube and 4.3% (3) were not. When asked how long they had been watching or following Markiplier, 51.1% (47) said they had been watching or following him for four years or more, 34.8% (32) said they had been watching or following him between two and four years, and 10.9% (10) said they had been watching or following him for less than one year. The data gathered indicated that 92.4% (85) said they watch or have watched Markiplier stream (non-charity streams) on YouTube or Twitch and 4.3% (4) said they had not watched him stream on YouTube or Twitch. The respondents to this survey reported that 73.9% (68) follow Markiplier on some form of social media and 22.8% (21) did not follow Markiplier on any form of social media. Finally, the responses to the survey showed that 20.7% (19) were paid sponsors or members of Markiplier's community on YouTube while 76.1% (70) were not paid sponsors or members.

*Measurements.* Most of the survey items were adapted from previous research to increase the likelihood of validity and reliability, except for the scale on behavioral intentions, which was created for this study.

For perceived authenticity, a 16-item Likert scale was adapted from the previously referenced Cohen and Tyler study (344) to measure the perceptions of authenticity that respondents had about Markiplier. The items were related to perceptions of Markiplier in terms of if he appeared "real," if he stood by his values and beliefs, and whether he was his own person free of influence. Sample items from the scale included: "Markiplier seems aware of who he truly is," "Markiplier lets people tell him what to do [reverse-coded]," and "Markiplier always stands by what he believes." Each item had responses that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The resulting scale had excellent reliability ( $\alpha = .85$ ,  $M = 5.90$ ,  $SD = .60$ ).

For perceived closeness, a 10-item Likert scale was also adapted from Cohen and Tyler (344) to measure the perceptions of closeness that respondents felt they had with Markiplier. The items were related to perceptions that Markiplier was within reach of his followers and if they felt he was attentive to people within his social networks. Sample items for the scale included: "Markiplier seems 'within

reach' of me," "Markiplier is attentive to people within his social network," and "Markiplier would not interact with me on social media" [reverse-coded]. Each item had responses that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). These items demonstrated excellent reliability ( $\alpha = .85$ ,  $M = 3.88$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ).

For parasocial relationships, a 15-item Likert scale was adapted from Rubin, Perse, and Powell (1977) to measure feelings and behaviors that may suggest a parasocial relationship between Markiplier and respondents. The items attempted to establish if viewers felt they had a friendship with Markiplier. Sample items for this scale included: "I like hearing the voice of Markiplier," "sometimes I make remarks to Markiplier while watching his videos," and "I like to think of Markiplier as someone who is like an old friend." Each item had responses that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The items had excellent reliability ( $\alpha = .89$ ,  $M = 5.56$ ,  $SD = .87$ ).

For behavioral intentions, scales and questions were developed to assess whether the three previous variables may affect respondents' intended behavior. To measure respondents' intentions regarding donating to charity through Markiplier or attending events in which Markiplier will be present, two, 6-item Likert scales were developed, one for charity and one for events. Both scales asked whether the respondent will or will not donate to charity through Markiplier or attend an event in which Markiplier will be present in the future. Items for these scales included: "I would intend to donate money in the near future" and "I would not have it in mind to pledge money to the charity" [reverse-coded]; "I would intend to purchase tickets and attend the event" and "I would not plan to attend the event" [reverse-coded]. Each item had responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The scales for intentions towards donating to charity ( $\alpha = .92$ ,  $M = 5.30$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ) and towards attending events in which Markiplier would also be present ( $\alpha = .97$ ,  $M = 4.80$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ) both showed excellent reliability.

## Results

For the first and second research questions,<sup>1</sup> which asked whether authenticity and closeness had an influence on the formation of parasocial relationships, the results showed that both authenticity and closeness significantly predicted parasocial

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<sup>1</sup> All research questions were explored using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analyses.

relationships. Based on the results, the perception viewers have of a YouTuber's authenticity and the closeness they perceive to that person positively impacts their perception of an existing parasocial relationship between themselves and the media figure.<sup>2</sup>

For research question three, which questioned whether parasocial relationships influenced respondents' intentions to donate to charities that Markiplier promoted, the results showed that parasocial relationships were a significant predictor of intentions to donate to charitable organizations at Markiplier's request.<sup>3</sup> Along with this, the results showed that closeness was a predictor of intentions to donate to charitable organizations. According to these data, feeling a closeness with a YouTuber and feeling as if a parasocial relationship exists between the self and the media figure predicts intentions to donate to charitable organizations.

Finally, for research question four, which questioned whether parasocial relationships had an influence on respondents' intentions to attend events where Markiplier would also be present, the results showed that parasocial relationships were a significant predictor of intentions to attend an event where Markiplier would also be present.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, according to these data, having a parasocial relationship with a YouTuber predicts intentions to attend events the media figure will be attending.

## Discussion

This study was designed to explore if perceptions of authenticity of and closeness to a YouTube star influences the formations of parasocial relationships (i.e. one-way friendships), and if those parasocial relationships influence the intentions people have to make charitable donations at the star's request and attend media

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<sup>2</sup> This overall model predicting PSRs was significant ( $F(2,88) = 16.57, p < .001, r^2 = .26$ ). Authenticity ( $B = .28, SEB = .37, \beta = .53, p = .001$ ) and closeness ( $B = .28, SEB = .37, \beta = .21, p = .02$ ) both predicted PSRs with Markiplier.

<sup>3</sup> This overall model predicting intentions to donate to charity at Markiplier's request was significant ( $F(3,88) = 17.65, p < .001, r^2 = .36$ ). Having a PSR with Markiplier predicted intentions to make charitable donations ( $B = .38, SEB = .14, \beta = .52, p < .001$ ) as did having a perception of closeness with Markiplier ( $B = .24, SEB = .12, \beta = .28, p = .02$ ).

<sup>4</sup> This overall model predicting live event attendance was significant ( $F(3,85) = 9.39, p < .001, r^2 = .23$ ). Having a PSR with Markiplier predicted intentions to attend live events where Markiplier would make an appearance ( $B = .40, SEB = .21, \beta = .74, p = .001$ ).

events at which the star will make an appearance. The existing literature indicates that authenticity and closeness drive people to become followers of particular YouTubers, and that these variables also influence the development of parasocial relationships. The literature also indicates that these relationships can drive behavior in various contexts. This study attempted to establish a connection between these variables specifically on the platform YouTube and explored if the existence of these variables increases intentions to perform particular behaviors requested of followers by microcelebrities on YouTube.

The results first showed that both authenticity and closeness influenced whether respondents felt they had a parasocial relationship with the YouTuber Markiplier. For this study authenticity was defined as a social construct that typically includes honesty, realness, and genuineness (Garcia-Rapp 122). Closeness, for this study, was defined as the potential to be noticed by a media figure (Cohen and Tyler 343). Being that authenticity and closeness were considered viewer-perceived factors for this study, the results demonstrate that viewers' perceptions of Markiplier were an important part of their formation of a parasocial relationship (i.e. a one-sided relationship; Rubin, Perse, and Powell 156) with him. In turn, these parasocial relationships and feelings of closeness predicted followers' intentions to donate to charity. Finally, these parasocial relationships predicted attendance at events where Markiplier would be present.

It is interesting to see that this demonstration of our society's fanaticism with media figures can begin online with microcelebrities; when a media figure appears authentic and gives the impression that they are within reach, the result is that people are willing to do what is asked of them based on a false sense of kinship with that person. In a society filled with overwhelming numbers of mediated messages, knowing how to attract followers is particularly vital if one wants to be noticed and promote social change. It appears if a YouTuber wants to have a parasocial relationship with their followers, to gain and maintain more followers, to establish a sense of community, and to have their request fulfilled by the followers within that community, then it is necessary to appear authentic and close (i.e. within reach) to one's viewers in order to foster relationships.

Popular culture becoming participatory culture is a fascinating area of study because being able to interact with and contribute to pages hosted by media figures is changing the pop culture landscape. Recalling Chau's participatory culture framework (72), a website like YouTube that hosts pages maintained by microcelebrities is the perfect place to form parasocial relationships with fans.

Platforms like YouTube give content creators the ability to express their authentic selves, encourage participation from fans, ask for opinions on cultural items, and create a sense of closeness with followers. To one of Chau's points, YouTube and similar sites may host strong civic engagement (67). Again, for Markiplier, requests were about donations and gaming event attendance, but requests by other YouTubers could extend beyond charity and encourage participation in movements or other social causes.

YouTube is clearly a place where a psychological sense of community can be formed, led by microcelebrities within their own niche communities. Previously, we referenced the McMillian and Chavis model outlining a sense of community and discussed the component of influence. According to their model, people in the community have a perceived sense of influence over other community members. The results of our study show, at least in part, from where that influence stems. YouTube stars such as Markiplier can influence their community members to perform offline behaviors by fostering false friendships with their followers and appearing to be themselves at all times. These results relate back to the style of videos by Markiplier (and other microcelebrities like him); they appear to have parasocial interactions (Horton and Wohl 215) with their viewers and use humbleness to increase feelings of intimacy (Dredge). The fact that any member of virtual communities such as Markiplier's fans can access and view the same videos allowing for similar or simultaneous experiences creates a sense of belongingness in a community — much like the idea of the imagined community (Anderson).

While this study did provide significant results, it had its limitations as well. In retrospect, the closeness scale may not have been the most appropriate scale for this study. The scale items do not exactly line up with the concept of a parasocial relationship. A parasocial relationship should be a one-sided relationship, and the items on the scale leaned more towards a two-sided, real-life relationship (e.g. the celebrity would interact with me). This may explain why, in this study, the levels of reported perceived closeness were much lower than that of perceived authenticity and may explain why closeness had only minimal effect on respondents' behavioral intentions. Second, the sample for this study was very small (92) compared to Markiplier's 23 million subscribers and so this study only represented a small section of those subscribers. However, because Markiplier has such a particular following, and because the means for the authenticity and parasocial relationship scales were so high, it is unlikely that having a larger sample size would greatly change the results. It is likely that although the sample could be bigger, most

respondents would answer in a similar fashion to those who responded to this study. Perhaps the largest limitation of this study is only the viewers of Markiplier were studied. Others should use caution when generalizing the results of this study to other YouTubers, especially those who create different content than Markiplier (e.g. vloggers, beauty gurus, DIY YouTubers).

In future studies, it would be interesting to test this idea of parasocial relationships driving behaviors with other YouTubers or online personalities. Knowing that respondents in this study seemed more willing to comply with Markiplier's request of donating to charity or buying a ticket to an event brings up the question of what other requests individuals would be willing to comply with if they had a parasocial relationship with the personality in question. If the parasocial relationship is strong enough, it may be possible for personalities to get their viewers to comply with many types of requests.

## Conclusion

YouTube is, and will continue to be, a giant in the world of media and popular culture. Its unique ability to allow anyone to watch, create, and share sets it apart from other platforms before it, and these features allow users to create and take part in unique communities. As YouTube presses on and continues to grow, so will YouTubers; and these content creators clearly have a significant influence on the individuals that view their content. Knowing what attracts followers, and, further, what encourages those followers to act on request are questions worthy of continued study.

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